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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000256

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [CM](#)

SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S JUSTICE MINISTER SAYS NORTH WILL  
SUPPORT BIYA, BUT NOT ANOTHER BETI OR BAMI

REF: A. YAOUNDE 225

[1](#)B. YAOUNDE 237

[1](#)C. YAOUNDE 246

Classified By: Political Officer Tad Brown for reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The struggle for Cameroon's future, including President Paul Biya's succession, should be viewed through ethnic and regional lenses, according to Amadou Ali, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Justice. In a recent, wide-ranging and frank discussion with the Ambassador, Ali said the foundation of Cameroon's stability is the detente between Biya's Beti/Bulu ethnic group, which predominates in Cameroon's South Region, and the populations of Cameroon's three Northern Regions, known as the Septentrion, which are ethnically and culturally distinct from the rest of the country. The Septentrion will support Biya for as long as he wants to be president, Ali predicted, but would not accept a successor who was either another Beti/Bulu, or a member of the economically powerful Bamileke ethnic group. Ali's analysis and his willingness to speak so frankly about such a sensitive topic reinforced our conviction that Cameroon's political elite is increasingly focused on jockeying for the post-Biya era. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, called on Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Justice Amadou Ali on February 27 to discuss the recently-released Human Rights Report (ref b). Ali displayed his typical gregariousness, but was even more frank and expansive than usual as he discussed Cameroon's internal political struggles for more than one hour.

Anti-Corruption: New  
Strategy, More Arrests  
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[1](#)3. (C) Ali said his campaign to pursue corrupt government officials continued, but that it was an increasingly low-key effort to pressure officials to return stolen funds. Ali implied that he and Biya had decided to shift strategies in the anticorruption fight. Instead of the spectacular arrests that characterized the initial years of the investigations (dubbed "Operation Epervier" or "Sparrowhawk" by the Cameroonian press), which Ali characterized as dangerously destabilizing, Ali said the focus was now on asset recovery, including through negotiations with corrupt officials, pressuring them to return funds or face public prosecution.

[1](#)4. (C) Ali promised more arrests in the coming days and said he had ordered the construction of a new wing in the Yaounde prison to house an influx of prominent former government officials. Unlike in previous meetings, Ali did not complain that the U.S. and other countries were not helping the GRC. Instead, Ali said that the GRC has been focusing on recovering assets present in Cameroon. Ali welcomed the Ambassador's recommendation that the GRC seek to participate in the World Bank's Stolen Asset Recovery (StAR) Initiative and admitted that the GRC's earlier efforts to

outsource asset recovery to hired guns had proven costly in terms of time and money, with no results.

#### All Politics is Regional

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15. (C) Ali held forth at length about Cameroon's political struggles, dismissing the formal opposition and focusing instead on Cameroon's ethnic and regional groupings. Ali derided John Fru Ndi, the leader of the leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), saying that Fru Ndi was corrupt (and had pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars that Cote d'Ivoire President Laurent Gbagbo had given the SDF) and power-hungry. Instead, Ali argued, the real opposition to the GRC has always come from the "grasslanders," the ethnic Bamilekes in the West Region and the Anglophone communities in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. Ali said Cameroon's other ethnic groups bore a pathological distrust of Bamilekes (who are sometimes construed as co-conspirators with Anglophones, the so-called Anglo-Bamis) because they were aggressive in extending their commercial dominance of Cameroon. According to Ali, the Bamilekes had taken over Douala and were conspiring to extend their communities throughout Cameroon, including by sending their women to give birth in far flung regions. Ali argued it was no coincidence that the rioting in February 2008 was most severe in areas with large Bamileke populations.

Balancing Power:  
Bamis, Betis and Northerners

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16. (C) Ali said Cameroon's three Northern regions, which are ethnically and culturally distinct from the rest of Cameroon, would continue to support Biya for as long as he wants to remain president, but that the next president of Cameroon would not come from Biya's own Beti/Bulu ethnic grouping, an assertion Ali said he made publicly in a 2003 speech. Asked what the Septentrion would do if Biya nominated a fellow Beti to succeed him, Ali asserted that Biya, knowing it would be unacceptable to the rest of Cameroon, would never make such a decision. Even if Biya's own tribesmen sought to assert themselves, Ali said the Betis were too few to take on the Northerners, much less the rest of Cameroon. Ali said Bamilekes had approach leading Northern elites to seek an alliance between their respective regions, but that Northerners (and other ethnic groups) were so suspicious of Bamileke intentions and afraid of their economic power, that they would never conspire to support Bamileke political power.

Praise for the BIR,  
But Also Anxiousness

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17. (C) Ali praised the Rapid Intervention Battalions (BIR) that have been tasked with securing the recently-acquired Bakassi Peninsula and Cameroon's maritime domain, but expressed concern that the regular military was growing increasingly bitter in light of the BIR's success. Ali was unsparing in his criticism of Minister of Defense Remy Ze Meka, saying he expected Biya to have fired him long ago, but certainly in the coming cabinet shuffle. Ali said that when he was Minister of Defense (from 1997-2001), Avi Sivan, the Israeli national who oversees the BIR, reported directly to him. (Note. Colonel (Retired) Abraham ("Avi") Sivan is a dual citizen of Israel and Cameroon (with valid passports from both). Sivan is acting in a private capacity after having retired as the last serving Defense Attach from Israel. End note.) When Ze Meka succeeded Ali at the head of Defense, Sivan obtained and provided to Biya evidence that Ze Meka was embezzling BIR funds, leading Biya to put the BIR under his direct supervision. Ali said the generals were irredeemably corrupt, but doubted that Biya would take steps

to remove them. Nevertheless, Ali analyzed Cameroon as a low-risk country for a coup, saying the armed forces were sufficiently fractured and controlled by the Presidency (to the point where no troops can move without Biya's written assent) to render an uprising implausible.

Comment: Transition:  
The Only Game in Town  
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18. (C) Ali's outspokenness about Cameroon's internal political factions reinforces our growing impression that Biya's succession is, at the same time, the only taboo subject in public discussion and the only important subject in private discussion. Ali's claims that Cameroonians fear Bamileke political power (or Anglo-Bami power, as it is sometimes cast) too deeply to ever support a Bamileke should be taken with a grain of salt. Although Fru Ndi is no longer perceived as a serious political contender (ref a), most observers believe Fru Ndi--an Anglophone--won the popular vote in 1992. But most of Cameroon's ethnic elites likely view politics through the same regional/ethnic lens as Ali, and steadily rising socio-economic frustration among the general population offers a dangerous opportunity to those who would exploit ethnic rivalries to serve their own political agendas.

19. (C) Ali's claim that the GRC has shifted its anti-corruption focus to track stolen assets within Cameroon jibes with what the head of Cameroon's financial intelligence unit told us separately (ref c). While Ali and Biya's focus on asset recovery is certainly congruent with Cameroonian public opinion, we are concerned that Ali's willingness to prioritize asset recovery ahead of judicial remedies might lead to kleptocrats negotiating their way out of accountability for their crimes.  
GARVEY